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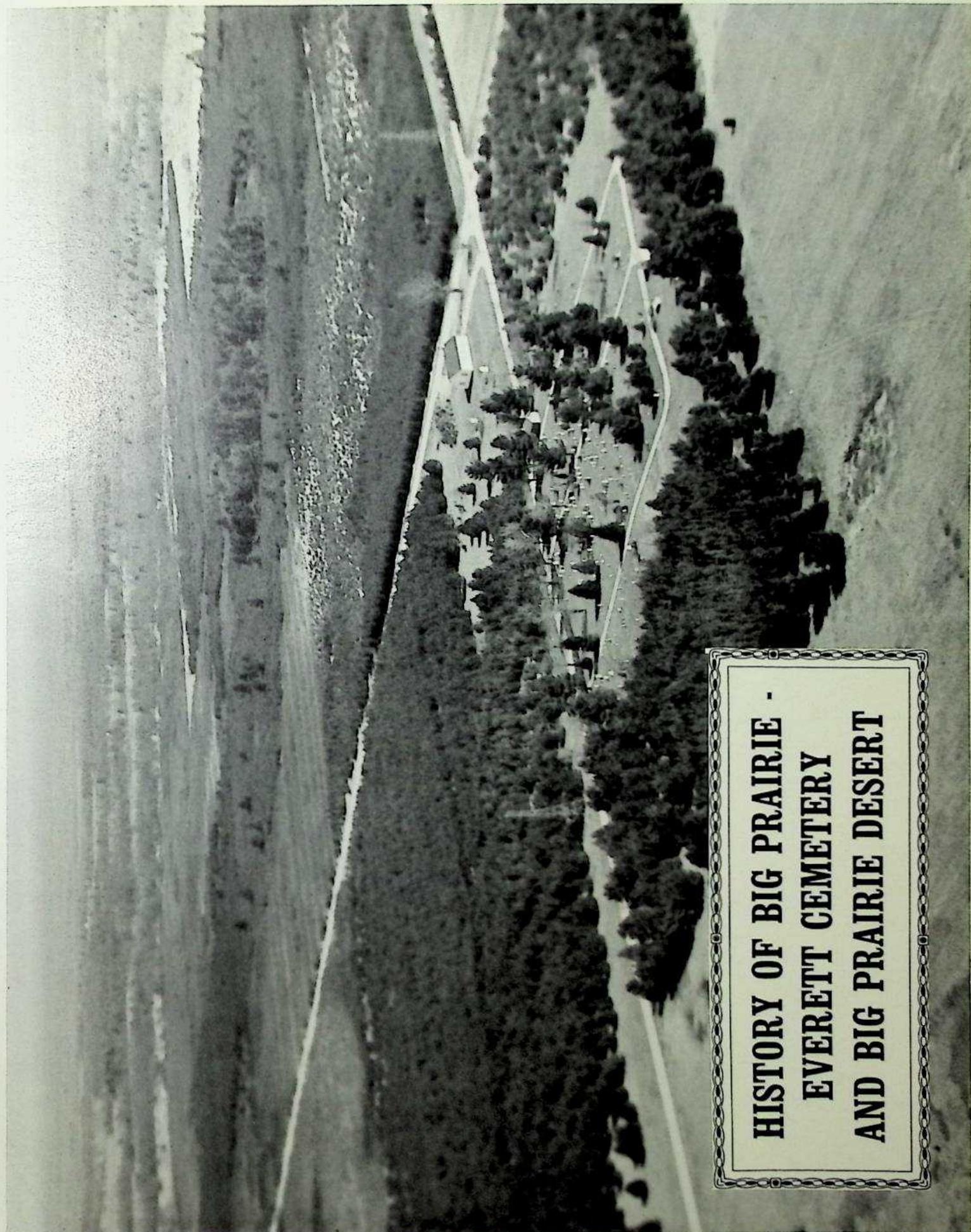
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HISTORY OF BIG PRAIRIE
EVERETT CEMETERY
AND BIG PRAIRIE DESERT

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Introduction

The three articles contained in this booklet were independent efforts to preserve some part of the colorful history of the Big Prairie Desert.

The history of the cemetery was prepared by Howard Douglass for the Bi-Centennial and read at the Memorial Day Services at the Chapel in 1977 by Mrs. Martha Evans. So many people asked to buy a copy of the history that it was decided to publish it along with the history of the desert prepared by Mrs. Velma Matson and Mrs. Evans. All of the authors have donated their writing to benefit the cemetery upkeep. Thus, all proceeds and donations made as a result of the sale of this booklet will go to the Big Prairie-Everett Cemetery board to help keep the Big Prairie-Everett cemetery a beautiful oasis in the reforested Big Prairie Desert.

This booklet is dedicated to those pioneer ladies who began the tradition of taking special care of the cemetery and who founded the "Old Social," and to the present day ladies who are working so hard to carry on the tradition.

A HISTORY OF BIG PRAIRIE - EVERETT CEMETERY Newaygo County, Michigan

The Big Prairie-Everett Cemetery lacks but a single year of being as old as Newaygo County itself. Newaygo County was formally established in early 1851 and Big Prairie Township (which at that time included what later became Everett township) in March, 1852. More about that later.

We have a great heritage here which we must retain for future generations. I am writing this history in hopes that some of the fast disappearing lore on the subject might be preserved for posterity. Authentic information is difficult to find, many links are missing, old records have a way of becoming lost or destroyed, and word-of-mouth answers are more often wrong than right. I have high hopes that someone, anyone, having authentic or reliable information or knowledge pertaining to the subject will come forward to correct or supplement what I have written. I have used the utmost care in what I have written, but I am sure there is much more to be found, if it could be uncovered.

Howard Douglass, Author

By 1836 the Indians had given up title to the territory in what was to become Newaygo County, and in 1839 the lands came onto the market. Prior to this, settlers had come to the area to lay "squatter" rights to certain lands along the Muskegon River. Immediately after the sale started, the saw and ax were heard along the land adjacent to the river and mills started operation in a very small way at Newaygo and Muskegon Forks (Croton). The axes dug deeper and deeper into the forest and soon the hills along the river were denuded of timber. The industry needed food and labor for man and beast. As population increased at these two points, fingers of it pushed farther and farther into the forest and away from the river. Hardy families looked for land to clear for farms as well as for timber to sell. A common practice of these people was to work in the woods in the winters and clear and cultivate their acres during the summer.

By the middle of the century these fingers of population had reached some four miles north of Muskegon Forks to an area of several hundred acres almost completely devoid of trees yet with a dark fine soil, level, and covered with a dense coarse grass, unfit for pasture. This area came to be called Big Prairie. Several other prairie areas had been located but none as extensive.

Here was an ideal place to stop, work the soil for much needed provender in season and the rest of the time work in the woods. Soon a substantial community was established here, raising excellent crops of wheat, corn and other much needed food for man and beast so necessary to the prevailing industry. Orchards were set out, a school building was erected. A store, blacksmith shop, post office and many homes soon appeared. Even a race track was built. Quite a community it must have been.

The first permanent settler in the area was Ephraim Utley, who, in 1849 purchased the John McBride claim on the north side of the prairie along with other lands in the community. Included in his holdings was the SE $\frac{1}{4}$ of the NE $\frac{1}{4}$ of Sec. 13 in what is now Everett township. It was in this 'forty' that the Big Prairie Everett Cemetery would be situated.

According to the abstract covering the parcel occupied by the cemetery, Utley secured this part of his holdings, by patent, from Joseph Pitman, a soldier. The original deed bears the name of President Zachary Taylor and was dated 1847. Utley moved here in 1849 and built a frame house at what became known as Utley's Corners.

Also, during 1849 and '50 numerous others settled around the prairie: Wm. S. Utley, Aaron Swain, Ben Olney, Alexander Balziel, Walter and Emerson Bonny, James and Wm. Barton, Theodore Taylor, James Gibbs, to mention a few.

William S. Utley, a cousin of Ephraim, a bachelor at this time, worked at Stern's Mill at Muskegon Forks (later became Croton) and built there the first bridge across the Muskegon River in 1850. He lived in a small shanty in the extreme southwest corner of what is now Big Prairie township. In 1851 he married Martha Gooch and moved to a log cabin one-half mile north and across the road from where now is the cemetery. The following July (1852), Martha died. There being no site already set aside for such a purpose, Ephraim suggested that the body be buried in his cornfield on a knoll which now constitutes the original portion of the cemetery, and that when Aaron Swain, a neighbor and public surveyor, came home he would have the plot surveyed and properly laid out as a burial ground. The suggestion was adopted and March Helen Utley became the first resident of the cemetery in July, 1852. Swain returned from his employment and duly plotted the one acre, about thirteen rods square. Mr. Utley then conveyed this land to the township to be used as a permanent cemetery. The plot thus laid out lies in the SE $\frac{1}{4}$ of the SE $\frac{1}{4}$ of the NE $\frac{1}{4}$ of Section 13 of what is now Everett township, but at that time was Big Prairie.

As the years went by, population grew and more deaths occurred, prompting Cyrus Moon, in 1883, to advocate the enlargement of the plot. Thus, in 1885 at a joint meeting of the Big Prairie and Everett township boards, held in Alleyton, enough more land was purchased from Samuel Hekendon to bring the size of the plot to five acres, about 28 $\frac{1}{2}$ rods square. One hundred dollars was set aside by the two townships for this purpose. The new addition embraced lands to the north, south and west of the original area. The whole was replatted and numbered, which designation is still used today.

Within a few years after the settlement of the prairie, Mother Nature stepped in in a most retributive manner. During the early years of the settlement abundant crops had been raised with no regard to the soil, which was relatively shallow, of very fine texture and easily abused. With the tenacious "buffalo grass" gone, the wind got a toe-hold and, and once started, the damage increased rapidly and viciously. Relentlessly wind filled the air with clouds of dust and fine sand, bringing a curse from washerwomen for several miles around, but still greater damage to the land itself. Within a few years after this erosion started, nothing of this once lush area was left but firm subsoil and "buffalo humps" where a tree or clump of native vegetation had held firm and now stood out as much as four to five feet above the original level of the terrain. It came to be called the Big Prairie Desert, an appellation distasteful to the native. The whole was a sad and distressing tale, for it would be many a year before man was to arrest the erosion.

The cemetery was not outside the realm of destruction and it, too became scarred with blowouts and mounds. These, and dewberry bushes, marked my first recollection of the cemetery. Further, sextons had a custom of leaving a mound of earth on the new grave. Subsequently, the rough box enclosing the casket would collapse and this mound would settle, leveling the surface. To step on one of these mounds to trim grass or do other work and have it suddenly sink, and that's the way they would go down, with a swoosh and a cloud of dust, is something to remember.

In the latter part of the 1870's, a group of ladies, after the funeral of a young girl, thought it shameful that so nice a young person should be buried in such a forlorn and forgotten place. They vowed to do something about it, and thus the Cemetery Society was organized. Though their funds were meager, the group was large in number and firm in determination. As a result, over nearly a century they have contributed a tremendous amount of labor and accomplished much toward betterment of the situation. The Society is still in existence, buying flags for soldiers' graves (now numbering 114), conducting Memorial Services, setting out trees, and providing many other unobtrusive labors of thoughtfulness.

Years and decades sped by with monotonous regularity and outside of funerals, burials, Memorial Services and occasional mending of fences there was little activity about the place. There were some twelve to fifteen burials per year, but as it was common in those days to bury in small 'family' cemeteries, the above figure of deaths is misleading.

Eventually, thanks to the two town boards, numerous interested individuals and, as afore mentioned, the Cemetery Society, the Big Prairie-Everett Cemetery came to be one of the outstanding rural burial grounds in Western Michigan. Trees-maple, white pine, spruce, white and red cedar were planted in more or less natural arrangement. A new fence, with steel corner and gate posts, was erected in 1915. Three metal, ornamental gates kept out wantering livestock which pastured in prairie as public domain. But something must be done to protect the place from the wind erosion that was rapidly destroying the open prairie.

More land was eventually needed whereon protective measures could be taken and in July, 1922, enough more land was purchased from David Livingston for the sum of \$200 to bring the total acreage of the cemetery to 15½ acres. Shortly thereafter, the Cemetery Society, represented by Fred Bitson and Tom Terwillegar, went to the woods near Horseshoe Lake and got enough white pine trees to plant the area to the west of the cemetery in order to protect it from the prevailing westerly winds. The next year they purchased white pine seedlings from the Forestry Department and planted the area to the north.

Then, in 1936, the Society bought 2,000 trees and set them out on the south side. Also, in 1936, the south fence was removed and a new fence erected around the entire plat. In 1942 Big Prairie township purchased six thousand red pine seedlings. These were planted across the road to the east of the cemetery on land deeded to the township by Irving Utley. This completed the ring of wind-breaks around the knoll that, ninety years before, had been set aside as a final resting place for the community's deceased.

In June, 1929 the Big Prairie town board set aside \$200 for cemetery improvement. This seems to have been the beginning of a Renaissance Period at the cemetery which was to last for some twenty-five years. The place was to rise from a bleak and rather forlorn spot to a green, placid necropolis worthy of the hardy souls resting therein. In 1933, T. C. Ewing of Newaygo put down a two inch well and erected a windmill with water tank, the tank being enclosed a year later. As the wind was inclined to be unpredictable, especially at that time of year when most needed, a gasoline engine with pump jack was installed. With the drilling of a larger well several years later, the mill and tank were sold (1945) to a Mr. Allen of Croton Road where they are still in use.

In 1933, metal markers with flag holders were provided for war veterans. At the annual township meeting held on April 2, 1934, it was decided that inasmuch as money was to be spent on the building here-to-for called the Union Church the

church would hereafter be referred to as the Funeral Chapel. Up to this time the choosing of cemetery lots had been simply a matter of "I'll take this one," but on May 18, 1934 it was determined that a deed must be required to show ownership. After due process of law, deeds were placed on sale in 1935 for the sum of one dollar each.

In 1933, the $W\frac{1}{2}$ of the $SW\frac{1}{4}$ of the $NW\frac{1}{4}$ of Section 18 of Big Prairie was donated to the township by Irving Utley to be added to the cemetery. This did not include the three acres containing the Chapel. On May 5, 1935, Mr. Utley deeded the east twenty of this forty to the township for the same purpose.

In 1935, 500 feet of $2\frac{1}{2}$ inch iron pipe were purchased. However, it was 1937 before the water line was extended to all areas of the cemetery. The two-inch well having proved inadequate, bids were taken for a new and larger one and in 1940 Mike Denton, of Ensley township, drilled one of four-inch and a six foot square well pit put in. A well house was erected to house the electric pump and tank. At this time Mr. Denton also drilled a new two-inch well at the Chapel. The pump at the cemetery remained until 1968 when Bernard Lauritzen, of Reeman, installed a submersible jet. It was now possible to use eight sprinklers simultaneously.

In 1936 a receiving vault was built by Mr. Fred Cook, a stone mason, of Goodwell township. The cost of labor was \$200. Stone was furnished locally except the doorway and corner stone which were purchased from Big Rapids from a woman who was dismantling her family vault. The building is 14' x 16' with stone walls 16" thick. The building is capable of storing at least nine bodies. Electricity was brought to the building in 1948. Artificial grass and maroon drapes give the interior a quiet and restful atmosphere.

In 1937 the townships had Wes Cook build a ten by twelve foot tool shed on Block V. This building has a concrete floor and asbestos roof. The pine siding did not prove to hold paint well and in 1966 asbestos siding was put on.

After Memorial Day, 1937, work began under the supervision of Carl Wemple, to resurface the cemetery. Aided by Works Project Administration (WPA) aid the area was sodded, but most of it was seeded. Blocks I and IV followed and in 1939 the whole project was completed with the exception of Block V. This was resurfaced in 1943 under the supervision of Glen Dunham with soil from the Dudgeon property in Goodwell township. Seeding followed the next spring. At this time Mr. Dunham supervised the leveling, resurfacing, and seeding the Chapel lawn, and leveling and graveling of the Chapel yard. Gravel was provided by the County Highway Department.

In 1936 a metal archway was placed over the center gateway. All this enhanced the beauty of the cemetery.

In 1937 the O & A Electric Cooperative came to the community. The Chapel was wired in 1939 and a power line extended to the well. In 1940 the townships took out membership in the O & A and power was turned on. The power line to the well was routed across the cemetery and, as many lot owners complained of the poles on or near their lots, the line was routed around the cemetery in 1954. This necessitated going through the pines and as some poles needed replacing it was decided to put the line underground. Thus in the spring of 1972 Kenneth Smith buried the line from the vault to the well, with a 110 volt dropoff at the tool shed. This move necessitated the REA to put in a new pole and transformer. In digging the hole for the pole near the south entrance solid clay was encountered at a depth of eighteen inches. The driveways were graveled in 1942 by the County Highway Department.

A potter's field, thirty feet east-west and fifty feet north-south, was set up in the rear of the cemetery in 1953. It offers single openings marked by concrete markers. In this same year (1953) it was determined that the two townships operate on a fifty-fifty basis in regards to cemetery expense. Heretofore Big Prairie had borne most of the capital outlay and two-thirds of the maintenance costs.

Nineteen forty-five saw the purchase of our first power mower, a 22" Whirlwind rotary type. What a relief this was after pushing the old reel-type machines for so many years! A portable generator and trimmer was also purchased at this time. These two innovations cut down time and eased the back for maintenance people. In 1954 a second 22" (DeVere) was purchased but the old Whirlwind (with a larger mower) is still operating and can be for a number of years to come.

In 1946 two toilets were built and the McFadden people installed septic tanks. Lavatories were bought but they were stolen before they could be installed. They were not replaced. These were war years and Ed Jump had difficulties getting the materials he required.

In 1945 a suitable piano was purchased for use in the Chapel. Two years later (1947) two oil stoves were installed in the Chapel and a new chimney built. Suard posts were put in around the Chapel to ward off ever encroaching traffic and parkers.

In 1961 a considerable amount of work was carried out at the Chapel. It had been twenty years since the building had been painted and much longer than that since the last roofing job. As a consequence of this situation the building was reroofed and resided. Two windows at the north end of the building were removed. This work was done by Ted Hordyk.

It became apparent that, at the rate lots were being sold, the supply would become exhausted in the foreseeable future. As a result the trees to the south were removed in 1965, and in 1966 a plot of ground one hundred feet wide and extending to the west line was plowed, worked, fertilized and planted to a cover crop of rye grass. In 1973 top soil was put on, a new driveway leveled, sod taken off the driveway between blocks IV and V, and these driveways graveled. The work being done by Chuck Shaffer. In the spring of 1975 a four inch well was driven at the west end of this plot by the Kuhns Brothers.

In 1971, George Fredenburg and Harry Harper, under the auspices of the Cemetery Society, erected a 30 foot metal flag pole, adding sublimity and inspiration to the hallowed ground.

In 1975 the results of a census showed that we have about 1,200 burials. This cannot help being low as many of the old burials escaped the census taker.

The 1852 School District #1 was organized. Three acres of land were acquired in the extreme corner of the SE $\frac{1}{4}$ of the NW $\frac{1}{4}$ of Section 18 of Big Prairie township. Here a school house was built which would last for 25-30 years. The building was sided with boards placed vertically. The floor and seats were of hewn logs. My mother went to school here in the 70's. As erosion of the prairie took over, most of the families migrated and the school was moved to a more central location. The building remained and due to its adjacency to the cemetery, was used for funerals and church purposes. The building seems to have been here in the mid 80's, but its demise must have been shortly thereafter, but just when and how I don't know. At any rate, a frame structure was erected, probably by popular subscription as I find no evidence of the townships spending any money there for such a purpose. I

do find where wood was purchased for fuel. It is not clear when the townships took over the premises from the school district.

The new building was called Union Church or Mennonite Church as the latter group held services there for many years and did much for its maintenance. As aforementioned the building came to be known as a Funeral Chapel when it was obvious that, for the townships to spend any money there, it could not be classed as a church.



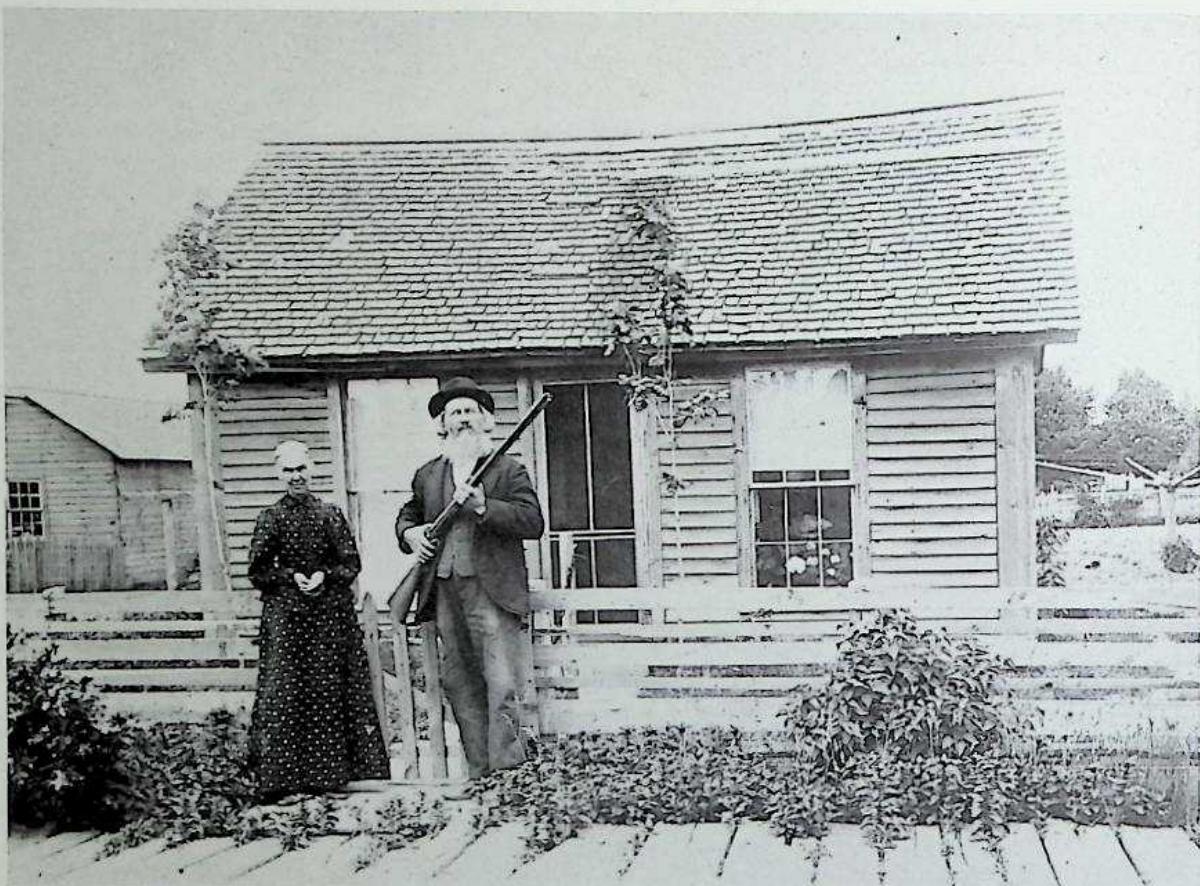
A CLOSER LOOK AT THE UNION CHURCH ABOUT 1906 OR 1907. THIS BUILDING WAS HIT BY LIGHTNING AND BURNED IN JULY, 1911.

Open sheds were built along the west and north sides of the church for protection of horses bringing their human cargoes to church or funeral. These sheds were well built and commodious and sheltered animal and vehicle quite well. The shed remained until the advent of the automobile made them of little use except as billboards. These disappeared in the twenties. On July 4, 1911, lightning struck the building and it was destroyed. Another and larger structure was built at the same site, again by popular subscription. Chauncy Miller was the carpenter.

Concerning sextons for the cemetery, I am not sure that at first there was one. General supervision of the cemetery was under the jurisdiction of the township health officer. One can only conjecture as to who did the digging at this early time. Perhaps it was a neighbor or a member of the family of the deceased.

In the years prior to 1880 the name of Cyrus Moon appears as having drawn money from the township for digging graves. Too, his name appears in the records when he resigned on December 11, 1886, so Mr. Moon must have been sexton but beginning when

I do not know. Upon his resignation Simeon Cox took over the task until 1901 when Charles Dunham took over.



CYRUS & MARY MOON, FIRST SEXTON.

Mr. Dunham in turn was followed by Charles Runnels in 1904. Mr. Runnels was sexton for many years, his term extending until 1931 when Percy Prestley took over the job for a few months.

In October 1932 came Norman Hansen and in midsummer of the following year found Frank Runnels, son of Charles Runnels, taking over the job previously held by his father. Frank served until the summer of 1935 when Steven Arnold took over. Steve remained until the winter of 1938 when George Albright became sexton. He served until the spring of 1943 when the present sexton, Howard Douglass, was appointed.

So, to the best of my ability, her it is. If anyone be aware of any errors or omissions, may he come forth and make the amends and receive my welcome.

Howard Douglass, the author.

A GEOGRAPHICAL and HISTORICAL ACCOUNT of the BIG PRAIRIE in NEWAYGO COUNTY, MICH.

by Velma F. Matson (written July 1960)

The geographical and historical development of the Big Prairie, a tiny hunk of ground in Newaygo County, Michigan is unique. There is probably no other place in the whole United States, that has developed through three distinct changes, such as this area has, in so short a time. For, within the span on one century, a part of Big Prairie has changed from a fertile farm land, to a desert and then to a young forest.

Until the year 1849, no one had settled on this prairie. Indians must have roamed across it, because many arrowheads were found there, but probably did not tarry long, as there was no protective shelter of trees.

In the year 1849, Ephraim Utley became the first permanent settler on the prairie. He was the leader of an expedition of about thirty people, among whom were members of his own family, the Walter and Emerson Bonney families and Theodore Taylor and Egbertson Goodrich, both single men. These people brought with them thirty-three cattle and six wagons loaded with their personal belongings. They reached the prairie from the south, after having spent the previous night in Croton.

Later in that same year, Aaron Swain and his family became the second group of permanent settlers. William Barton also settled on the prairie in 1849.

In 1850, James Barton, Alexander Dalziel, Benjamin Olney and their families and Mr. and Mrs. William S. Utley became settlers also. Dr. U. P. French arrived in 1852.

All of the above mentioned settlers bought the land upon which they settled from the state of Michigan. This land was designated as Salt Spring Lands, which referred to the appropriation by the National Government to the states for the purpose of furthering the development of saline resources.

Most of the lands they purchased were on a treeless plain, which was covered with grass. The soil was of the type now called Sparta loamy sand. It had a six to eighteen inch surface layer of a mixture of sand and dark brown or black organic matter. Under this topsoil was a subsoil of almost pure sand. It was one of the first areas to be farmed in Newaygo County, as it was easy to cultivate and clearing of the land was unnecessary. It did not, however, hold moisture at all well. Nevertheless, in years with plenty of rainfall, very good crops were raised and the farmers prospered, building comfortable and pretentious farmsteads. Wheat that produced forty bushels to the acre; rye so tall, that a child was lost in it for a long time, requiring a search by the family and neighbors, and vast quantities of buckwheat were raised.

A few settlers settled in the middle of the prairie, but most of them took up lands on the outer edge of it, so that a part of their property was farming land and a part of it was wooded land. Lumbering camps were already established

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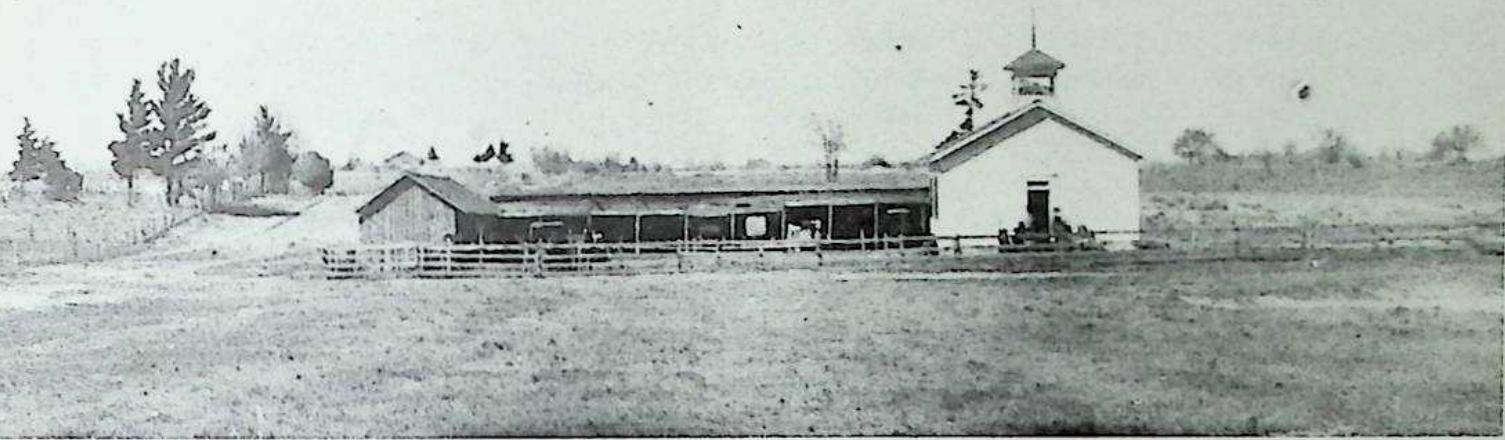
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A DESERT APPLE TREE
BIG PRAIRIE DESERT - NEWAYGO COUNTY



TYPICAL SCENE OF BIG PRAIRIE BEFORE RESTORATION.



UNION CHURCH ... UTLEY'S CORNERS, BIG PRAIRIE



TOURISTS ON BIG PRAIRIE DESERT
NEWAYGO COUNTY, MICHIGAN

to the south of the prairie and some of the new settlers set up other camps. Thus, huge crops were raised on these prairie farms in the summer and were sold to the lumber camps for winter use. Very few animals were kept on the farms and most of these were horses and oxen, which were worked on the farms in summer and taken by their owners to the lumber camps for winter work.

Nothing was put back into the soil and after ten or fifteen years of such farming, the rich topsoil had been depleted and with no protective organic matter left, the sand began to blow. It began about 1865 and by 1878, no farmers were left in the center of the prairie. They had moved to the outer edge of the prairie or even farther away to more productive farms or more lucrative employment.

No history of the prairie would be complete without more than mere mention of the Utley and Barton families. With this in mind, a digression is herewith made, before discussing the next stage in the development of the prairie.

Ephraim Utley, who was the first settler, bought 640 acres in what is now Everett township on the outer edge of the prairie. Thus, he had both farms land and forest lands. He soon set up a saw mill on his property, farming in the summer and lumbering in the winter. He was active in the affairs of the new community and held many public offices. He helped to organize the first school in this area in 1851. This school was located on section 18 of Big Prairie township, being about in the center of the section. Later, this school burned and a new one was built on the west side of section, where the Union Church stands now. Ephraim Utley remained on the prairie for twenty-three years and to this day, a certain crossroads on the prairie is called "Utley's Corners" in his honor.

William S. Utley, a nephew of Ephraim, did not come to the prairie for the purpose of farming. His father was a builder of bridges and had made an agreement to build a bridge at Croton. As his health had failed, he was unable to fulfill his agreement in person, so young William, who had learned the trade from his father, was sent. At the age of twenty-three, he built Croton's first bridge across the Muskegon River. He also helped to tie up the first sack of mail to leave Croton. He bought four widely separated, forty-acre tracts of land in the vicinity of Croton, but was attracted to the prairie shortly after the first settlers had arrived. He built many of the first houses and barns for the settlers, as well as the first schoolhouse, which was mentioned earlier. His first wife was the first person to be buried in the Big Prairie-Everett cemetery, about which more will be told. Later, he remarried and settled permanently on the prairie. For a period of about ten years, he was postmaster of a United States postal station, which was established to serve the residents of this area, using a room in his own home for the postoffice. He was a very active worker for the Prohibitionists in this region. He served in many public offices in the township and county and was a member of the Michigan state legislature in 1865 and 1866.

William Barton bought 600 acres mostly on section 18 of Big Prairie township, which was all prairie land. He built fine buildings and improved 300 acres of his farm. He raised some of the best crops in the community and set out a large orchard. He also held public offices and served his community for many years.

James Barton arrived in 1850 and bought 200 acres on the prairie near his brother. He also established a fine farm and pretentious buildings. He was one of a group of men, who helped to organize Newaygo County in 1851. At that time Newaygo County contained only two townships -- Newaygo and Brooks. James Barton was one of the first supervisors. In 1852, Big Prairie was the third township of the county to

organize, but it included much more territory than it does now. In that year, James Barton was nominated as delegate to the Michigan state legislature from the Newaygo district and was elected according to general understanding. On arrival at Lansing, he found King James Strang, the Mormon leader on Beaver Island, ready to occupy the seat to which Barton thought he was the sole claimant. Strang proved that Beaver Island was a part of Emmet County and that he had received more votes than Barton to the satisfaction of all concerned and Mr. Barton went home. Mrs. Barton, being very surprised at his returning so soon, began to question him. Mr. Barton drew himself up to his full height and replied with great dignity, "Mrs. Barton, I have only one wife; King Stang has four." It was later proven that Strang received his votes by fraudulent means. In 1870, James Barton was appointed Probate Judge by Governor Henry P. Baldwin and hereafter was known as "Judge" Barton.

The Barton and Utley families have a great many descendants, many of whom still live on or near the prairie. Many of them have given much time to civic and professional service. The histories of other early settlers and their descendants would also prove interesting, but further digression is not desirable.

By 1878, as was said, all the settlers had left the center of the prairie, which had become a sandblow. This was mostly located on section 18 and the two Bartons, heretofore mentioned, who it must be remembered, had fine well-kept farms, were among those who were forced to leave. James moved to the outer edge of the prairie and settled on section 8 and William moved several miles away.



SID UTLEY HOME ... LUCY & SID UTLEY, JUDGE JAMES BARTON, BILL UTLEY,
LOUISA BARTON.

When these lands reverted back to the state, they became known as Asylum Lands, the sale of which was to benefit the Deaf, Dumb and Blind Asylum of the state.

The "blow" started on the west side of the prairie and blew eastward. The surface soil and in some places the subsoil, to a depth of two or three feet had been entirely removed. In some areas, extreme wind erosion had resulted in the formation of a "desert floor" of small gravel. Elsewhere the sand had a rippled effect and continued to shift. The amount of sand that was removed from this plain which was nearly level, is indicated by a few remaining grass-covered hummocks that rise three to six feet above the wind-swept floor.



A VINE-CLAD MOUND, BIG PRAIRIE DESERT, NEWAYGO COUNTY, MICHIGAN

Fence after fence in the eastern part of this area was covered with dune-line accumulations of wind-transported sand. People living to the east of the prairie reported that after a "blow", everything in their houses was covered with fine sand. Former residents declare that the blowing sand hurt the face and hands more than a blizzard or sleet storm. Thus, Big Prairie became a desert. It even had an oasis. On one part of the prairie, near the original James Barton farm, was a small lake. When the sands began to shift, this was nearly filled up, but this one place remained moist and vegetation grew around it.

Big Prairie Desert became a tourist attraction. There was a movement in the county to preserve it as such, but residents of the prairie were not happy about this. The sand had already covered about seven hundred acres and where it would stop, no one knew. It became a local topic of conversation. Big Prairie Grange and other local organizations discussed it at their meetings.

This geographical history of the prairie would not be complete, without relating the part which the Big Prairie-Everett Cemetery has played in its development. In 1852, the first wife of William S. Utley had died. Two or three other persons had died and were buried near the woods, but Mr. Utley did not consider it proper to bury his wife where there was no established cemetery. He had just completed the building of a house for Mr. Aaron Swain, who was a surveyor. Mr. Swain's

land was flat, level prairie, suitable Mr. Utley thought, for a cemetery. (It is to be remembered that Mr. Utley's own property was near Croton.) As Mr. Swain was away on business, Mr. Utley asked Mrs. Swain if she thought her husband would give a small part of his farm for a public cemetery. Mrs. Swain thought it would be all right with her husband, so Mrs. Utley was buried at the place selected. When Mr. Swain returned, he surveyed a plot of ground around the grave and deeded this cemetery plot to the township. As time went on and more burials were made, the women of the community took it upon themselves to care for the cemetery plot. This was hard work from the first -- cutting the grass by hand, pulling the weeds, digging out the sandburs and planting flowers, but when the sand began to blow, here was an even greater problem, as the cemetery was located in the "blow" area. By this time, these women had organized themselves into a group called the "Old Social" with regular meetings held at the homes of the members.

Ways and means of stopping the blow were discussed. The "blow" was becoming so bad on the east side of the cemetery that it was almost impossible to get into the gate. Straw, hay and brush were hauled to the cemetery, time after time, to check the blow, but it did little good. A few of the women went to the woods, dug up small evergreen trees and set them out along the north boundary of the cemetery. Some of these trees grew and provided the humble beginning of a means to stop the "blow". In 1912, the "Old Social", as a group made a planting of trees on the forty acres east of the cemetery. This was the first group planting of evergreen trees on the desert. The earliest planting known was a private planting, probably for the purpose of protecting the buildings on the James Barton farm on section 8. There was a spruce planting on the west side of the cemetery, which is still called "Township Planting."

In 1933, the Big Prairie became a part of the Manistee National Forest. In 1936, a United States Ranger District headquarters was established at White Cloud, which is about six miles from the prairie. Except for ten acres planted on section 19 in 1936 by the Experimental Station, all plantings since that time, have been made by the Ranger District. In 1938, the eighty acres south of the Union Church was planted using Civilian Conservation Corps labor.

The 1939 and 1940 plantings were almost completely lost, due to sand and wind action on the seedlings and had to be replanted in 1941. In 1942 and 1943 several plantings were made, using labor from a nearby Conscientious Objector Camp. Plantings were also made in 1946 and 1947 and a replanting in 1949 -- not over a whole area, but in scattered spots. These plantings include Red, Jack, Scotch and Norway Pine. Five hundred twenty acres have been planted on the area designated as the desert, with a few scattered plantings on other parts of the prairie. It is estimated that there are approximately 800,000 trees growing now.

The primary purpose of the plantings was to stop the wind erosion of the soil. This purpose has been accomplished. There is evidence now, however, that the trees will produce a cash crop, far greater than the cost of the plantings. Trees of the 1936 planting have reached a height of twenty feet and over. In 1948, the first sale of Christmas trees was made from this planting. The sale was not large, but showed what can be expected from the "desert" in years to come. If the Christmas tree is cut properly, the stump will continue to grow and produce pulpwood in another fifteen to twenty years.

No trees have been cut since 1948, nor have any trees been planted since 1949. So the year 1949 marked the close of a century of settlement, progress, destruction and rehabilitation -- a century in which the Big Prairie had its land usage pattern changed three times -- from fertile farm lands, to a desert and then to a young



YOUNG PINE PLANTING, BIG PRAIRIE DESERT, NEWAYGO COUNTY, MICHIGAN

What does the future hold? The potential is great, but proper care and wise usage are the keys to the continued progress and success of the Big Prairie.

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INTERVIEWS

Mr. C. C. Mullett, former Newaygo Co. Agricultural Agent; Mr. Otis Shear, former superintendent of schools at White Cloud, member of the faculty at Michigan State University and boyhood resident of the prairie; Mr. Arthur Crofoot, 90 years of age, who has lived on the same farm near the prairie since birth; Mr. Howard Douglass, a resident of the prairie all his life, a grandson of William S. Utley and now sexton of Big Prairie-Everett Cemetery; Mr. Charles Dunham, who lived on the edge of the prairie for sixty-one years; Mrs. Marion Wing, 91 years old, who has lived near the prairie since 1882; Mrs. Grace Payne, 80 years old, who is the youngest daughter of William S. Utley and Milo Fetterley and Fred Bitson of the United States Forest Service.

NEWAYGO COUNTY'S MINIATURE SAHARA BIG PRAIRIE DESERT

by Martha Evans

From fertile farmland that produced 30 to 40 bushels of wheat to the acre, the Big Prairie, eight miles southeast of White Cloud was turned into a miniature Sahara. In recent decades the desolate desert has been restored. With man's present knowledge it could never be returned to cropland, but is has been turned into a stately pine forest.

The Newaygo County Album, published in 1884, says the prairie was discovered by one John McBride who settled there sometime previous to 1849 when he sold his claim to Ephriam H. Utley who became the first permanent settler in the township.

The late Harry L. Spooner, who devoted much of his lifetime to the study and writing of the history of Newaygo County, wrote in 1925:

"When Big Prairie was first settled in the fifties, the land was generally a prairie. There were about a thousand acres in the tract and it was surrounded by a forest of giant oaks, pines and other trees. The early settlers on the prairie were more lumbermen than farmers and the prairie offered an easy method of producing food for the men and animals used in logging operations. No clearing of land was necessary and the whole tract was put under the plow the first year of its settlement.

"The first crops were exceedingly good and the owners raised crop after crop without returning anything to the soil, not seeming to realize that this process could not go on forever. The result was inevitable.

"The wind began to blow the sand, in which there was but little humus, and in a few years the whole tract had to be abandoned and given over to the desert. It did not stop with the original prairie, but encroached on the farms around its borders.

"Heroic efforts were made to save the surrounding farms. Fences were built, which held the sand in dunes. When one fence was covered, another was built on top of it, and still another on top of this. In spite of this, the desert won, and many acres of fertile land have been covered with the devastating sand."

Never realizing their crime, the lumbermen took the fertility from the soil, leaving a sandy waste which started blowing and continued to do so until peach and cherry trees, whose roots penetrated so deep the sifting sand could not undermine them, stood like victors upon mesas fifteen feet or more above the surrounding level, giving mute evidence of where the former surface of the prairie was.

These tree-covered oasis led certain persons to believe that trees could be used to hold the sand and keep it from covering more fertile farms.

Many anecdotes about the prairie have been handed down in this community from the settlers to their children and on down to their grandchildren and even great-grandchildren. One interesting one relates how there used to be a good

sized pond in the center of the desert. Miss Jane Harvey was on her way to a party, when crossing the desert near the pond she noticed a commotion at the pond and went to investigate.

Some sandhill cranes took exception to her presence and attacked her with their beaks and wings. She escaped with her life, but had many bruises and two black eyes to show for her curiosity.

There are many other stories of the late Judge James Barton, the Utley's, French's and the rest of the early settlers.

The desert with its white mounds of creeping sand became well known as a picnic place, especially for the last day of school outings. Tourists drove hundreds of miles to hike across the dunes and picnic in the sun.



The first trees were planted on the prairie by a group of women known as the "Old Social." They planted several acres north of the Big Prairie Cemetery in 1924 and later deeded it to the township.

At the time, they quietly engaged in a little illegal activity to prove a point. They gathered quack grass seed and planted quack around their new trees. Both trees and quack grass flourished.

In the spring of 1938 the U.S. Forest Service used the facilities of the Civilian Conservation Corps to start the Big Prairie Pine Forest Plantation. The CCC's planted 148 acres that spring and another 27 in the fall of 1940. The war interrupted the plantings and plans were made to resume them immediately after the war.

By this time the prairie had become widely publicized as the largest desert east of the Mississippi River and the tourists came to drive on the dunes and picnic on the white sands. On weekends it was not uncommon for several hundred tourists to be using the desert as a playground.

Many Newaygo County businessmen felt they would suffer a loss in tourist trade if the prairie was reforested and sought to have the planting dropped permanently. The Big Prairie Granger's, many of them having farms on the fringes of the prairie, visualized the prairie slowly swallowing their fertile farms in its ever creeping destruction. At this time the desert was moving about a quarter mile a year.

They got behind a movement to have the plantings continued on an even larger scale and had to really muster their forces to counteract a movement by the county Chamber of Commerce to keep the desert as a tourist attraction.

At the March, 1940 meeting of the Newaygo County Chamber of Commerce it was decided to develop more points of interest for tourist in the county and the group decided to develop Big Prairie Desert to a greater extent starting immediately. The chamber instructed its White Cloud representatives to contact the Forest Service to see what could be done to develop more roads to the desert and also erect more directional signs marking the location.

At the May meeting, Ford Fry, master of the Big Prairie Grange, presented the farmer's side of the picture to the chamber. He said that, "In 1890 the desert was not over 10 acres in extent. Today it has moved a mile and a half to the east and is estimated to be at least 1,000 acres in extent. It has already taken six or eight good farms which had to be abandoned and has covered clay soil suitable for farming to a depth of 20 to 30 feet in places. There are now good farms to the east of the desert in the path of the blow. A petition to the Forest Service to continue their planting program, designed to halt the spread of the desert has been signed by 120 residents of the Big Prairie District. On behalf of the Big Prairie people, I request that action taken by the county chamber at a previous meeting, that the Forest Service halt the planting program be rescinded."

After much dicussion in which it was pointed out that no planting program could fill up the desert, except over a long period of years, the county chamber voted to cooperate with the grange and request the planting program to continue.

In the spring of 1946 the planting was resumed by the Forest Service through the employment of local people to do the actual planting. From that date, through the spring of 1947, the plantings covered 360 acres to completely fill the government owned 535 acres of prairie land with approximately 8,000,000 trees from the U.S. Forest Service Chittenden Nursery at Wellston.

Additional land acquisition by the Forest Service and subsequent planting brought the total to 945 acres planted with over 13,500,000 pines by the end of 1965.

In 1974 the early plantings had grown to the point where they were ready for thinning and 2,375 cords were removed from 75 acres and the pulpwood sold to a pulp processor in Muskegon.

Future thinnings will allow for better growth of the standing trees, with increased income returning to the public sector from the plantation each year.

From desolate desert, to pine forest....the area now abounds with rabbits, birds and deer, offering pleasure to an entirely new group of recreationalists.



Driving through the Big Prairie now, one sees stately pines, and an occasional clump of lilacs or fruit trees to mark the former homesteads.

There is a spot north of the old Barton farm (now Fairbrother) where evidence of the devastation of the cropland still exists. Also, southeast of the Big Prairie Everett Cemetery a small parcel of privately owned land is surrounded by the pine plantation and still is a sand desert wasteland.

These reminders and other small privately owned, unplanted parcels, serve to show what would have been if some foresighted people hadn't tried to correct one of the major mistakes of the early Newaygo County settlers.

Now, thousands of tourists drive through the plantings to see one of the miracles of our time....a pine forest rising to help assure Michigan's claim as one of the major lumbering states in the United States.